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**Indians in the diaspora: A reflection of the Indian culture from an “outsider’s” perspective.**

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**Abstract**

This Paper examines settlement, dispersal and re-arrival of Indians since during the British Empire. This paper also examines the life of Indo-Kenyans as they settled and participated in the political and social affairs of Kenya and later Uganda.

**Keywords:** Indo-Kenyan diaspora; British Empire; Indian indentured; Colonial migration; Post-colonial Kenyan society; Indian Uganda

**Introduction**

Growing up in East Africa, especially a cosmopolitan city like Nairobi, one gets to experience a variety of cultural background. Nairobi is a melting pot of African, Asian, Western and Middle Eastern cultures. Specifically, the Asian community in Nairobi is quite big, slightly less than

half a million with a majority being from India. Notwithstanding, the Indian community has made vast contributions to the East Africa countries, which consist of Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda.

### **Historical background of Indians' Migration to East Africa**

Indians journey to East Africa began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they were shipped to the shores of Mombasa and Dar es Salam to work on a railroad line that would begin from Mombasa to Kampala connecting the port to the inland city in Uganda. While engaged in building the British East African Railroad, they brought with them skills to be able to build the railroad as well as the ability to trade. Many Indians opened businesses along the railway lines that eventually became small towns, such as Jinja, in Uganda. They also engaged in subsistence

farming and herding (Vicky, 2000). However, many Indians also suffered horrible deaths as a result of building the railroad. Between Mombasa and Nairobi there are many game reserves currently that serve as tourist attractions. Unfortunately, many Indians building the Mombasa-Kampala railroad endured horrible deaths as a result of attacks by lions and other wild animals. It is stated that they died at the rate of four per mile. Their demise is depicted in the movie “The Ghost and the Darkness” (Vick, 2000).

Despite their suffering, Kenyan natives always associated the Indians with the British colonialists. Because Indian presence in East Africa was as a result of the Colonizing government, the plight and destiny of Indians were intricately and inextricably linked to that of the British colony.

### **Reign of Idi Amin Dada**

Asians also suffered during the reign of Idi Amin Dada, the president of Uganda. During his reign many Ugandans remonstrated about the Indians claiming the Indians were being prosperous and enriching themselves at the expense of the Ugandans. To maintain political popularity, President Idi Amin demanded that all Asians leave Uganda August 7, 1972 (Warah, 2000). This expulsion resulted in numerous Indians fleeing to Nairobi, through the same railroad that they had built, to settle with relatives as sympathizers. One important cultural aspect of the Indian community that can be drawn from this situation is how close-knit families are. Some

Indians resettled in Kenya while others went to Britain. The only president at the time who condemned the actions of President Idi Amin was President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia (Warah, 2000).

These reflections of the Indian plight in Uganda by no means highlight the fact that their experience in Kenya had no challenges of its own. Mau Mau guerrillas during the fight for Kenyan independence resulted in attacks of the Indian community as well. Many of the night raids were for food supplies and other war supplies where possible. At this point the boundaries of race and class manifested into escalated racialized violence (Aiyar, 2015). Nevertheless, the Kenyan experience was nothing like the Ugandan experience as they continued to maintain residence in Kenya.

## **The Kenyan-Indian Community**

### *Assimilation and Integration*

The Indian communities in Kenya consist of the Sikhs, Ismailis, Goans, and Hindus. Of this group, many have maintained their cultural practices, which include food, clothing, religion, marriage and the Caste system... The Goans, however, are the ones who seemed to have embraced Christianity along with the Africa community when Christianity infiltrated Africa. Like most tribes in Kenya, Indians have deeply rooted cultural practices that they pass on to their children and grand children. Also true is that like many other cultural practices, those values usually remain within the group. Therefore, unless you are

part of the group, the expectation is you will not be exposed to those practices and rituals.

It is not surprising that Indians have been accused of not encouraging others to assimilate and be part of their culture. When the British colonized Kenya, they brought with them Christianity, which for the most part, they encouraged, or in some instances coerced Africans into assimilation. Indians, being the foreigners amidst the Africans did not encourage Africans to learn or even share their cultural practices. To many Kenyans this felt snobbish. However, in looking at the individual tribes in Kenya, many of the cultural practices were tribal bound. Nevertheless, the issue of not inculcating an appreciation of the Asian culture made it difficult for Africans to feel welcomed into the Asian culture. Where as, Africans could easily be Westernized, they could not be Asianized



or Indianized because of the closed nature of most Asian cultures.

*The invisible man*

Between 1887 and 1968 the number of Indians who lived in Kenya increased from 6,878 to 76,613 (Aiyar, 2015), yet their overall presence seemed the same. They have been largely living incognito. At Kenya's independence, the Indian population was about 2 percent of the Kenyan population. Given that Kenya has about 42 tribes, 2 percent is such a large percentage for one group. According to the 2009 Census, Kenyan Asians number 46,782 people, while Asians without Kenyan citizenship number 35,009 individuals (Population and Housing Census, 2010). For the most part, the Indian community has been isolated

and marginalized by the Kenyan natives. This has been beneficial to the Indian community who do not have to engage in the tribal turbulences that have rocked the country causing political upheavals. Nevertheless, events have brought Indians and many other Asian communities to the limelight.

During the American Embassy bombing in Nairobi Kenya in August of 1998, the need for Kenyans to unite and fight terrorist brought Asians, specifically Kenyan-Indians closer to other native Kenyans. . Kenya being a relatively safe country has never had to worry about terrorist attacks. As such, they have not had the need to have an efficient disaster response team. After the bombing, it took quite a while for the Kenya air force, army and police to coordinate rescue efforts. Many Asians, who own numerous businesses in Nairobi

mobilized rescue efforts with the tools they had to try and rescue as many Kenyans as they could. This brought a new found admiration and respect for the Asian community.

A second event that has brought the invisible man out of the shadows was the recent Westgate shopping mall attack of September 2013. This was a four-day siege of the mall that resulted in at least 60 deaths (Aiyar, 2015), many of whom were Indians.

Indians owned approximately a third of the retail shops at Westgate. Well-armed Indian security groups went into the mall to overpower the gunmen, and civilian organized rescue efforts, using their cars and trucks to transport the injured to the hospital, the closest of which were the M.P. Shah and Aga Khan University Hospitals, and bringing food and water to the rescuers. A twenty four hour vigil was held at the Jain temple within the Oshwal Center located opposite the mall to honor

and pray for the dead, and Indian Muslims formed a human chain of solidarity around Westgate. (Aiyar, 2015)

Images of the Indian and native African men and women working along side each other flooded the media. The Indian community was no longer invisible. They no longer occupied the places and spaces in Kenya unnoticed. Indians owned many of the businesses within the mall and those businesses employed many native Kenyans. The rescue effort showed by both groups demonstrated solidarity. “Patriotic fervor was on display as Kenyan flags were erected next to Hindu deities at the Jain Temple and were carried by all those who formed the human shield”

### **Indo-Kenyan Participation in Kenyan Affairs**

*Local and International Multicultural Businesses and Corporations*

Indians in Kenya are quite industrious and own most of the wholesale factories, large retail corporation's, technology companies, parts distribution, and manufacturing industries. These have boosted the Kenyan economy by creating many jobs. Initially, many Kenyan-Indians lived in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. In most recent years, after much interaction with Kenyans, Kenyan-Indians have been able to infiltrate various regions of Kenya. Many Indian businesses are seen sprouting in places like Nyeri, Muranga, Kisii, Kisumu, Migori, Marsabet et cetera, small towns that predominantly inhabited by single tribes. In these towns, Indians are quick to learn the local languages. In these towns, they own small business such as hardware stores, car shops,

spare parts stores, and supermarkets. They are referred to as *dukawallas (Shopkeepers)* from the Swahili word *duka*, meaning shop. Some are in the transportation business. In many places they have maintained dominance in such small businesses because of their unified front in maintaining monopoly. As a group they employed tactics such as working together to either drive prices up or down, soon running any African out of business. For the most part, Indians have been known for their skills in commerce especially as merchants. This has not changed in Kenya and they continue to grow large-scale in these areas assiduously boosting the Kenyan economy.

In addition to local and international multicultural companies, Kenyan-Indians, and Asians in general, have built schools, hospitals, and universities. Initially, the Asian community dominated many of these schools.

The most notable contributions to Kenya can be seen in their charitable organizations. Lions Club, Kenya Charity Schweepstate, Chandaria Foundations, Aga Khan Foundations... are brainchildren of the Asian community. Through these foundations, they are able to provide free clinics, and educational scholarships. The benefits from these foundations are not limited to the Asian communities. Many Africans have benefitted from these charitable contributions.

A specific example is a Kenyan- Indian from Kisii known as Dogo Khan. He was from a poor family and worked hard to open his own business. He dedicated his business to hiring individuals with disabilities because the society Kenya, by then, never cared about individuals with disability. They were left to beg in the streets. Their own communities rejected

many of them. Dogo Khan's secretary was deaf. Dogo Khan also hired visually impaired and blind people, others others with orthopedic impairments and so on. To top that many who worked for him had their children go best schools most of which were boarding schools and he paid half or full tuition depending on their need. All in all, the African community now viewed the Kenyan-Indian communities quite differently, even though they were once seen as only caring for their own.

### *Politics and Government*

For a community that was largely isolated for a long period of time, Kenyan-Indians began to collaborate with Africans in a variety of ways. As a result of this collaboration, Kenyan Indians have made instrumental contributions in politics, sports, and research. Politically, many Kenyan-Indians hold mayoral and parliamentary



position in addition to various other senior level civil service positions. Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee for example, was a very prominent Indian trader who benefited from the Kenyan-Ugandan railroad construction. He lived in Mombasa in 1890. He also led Indian Rights Movement- though his ideas and intentions often conflicted with independence movement groups at the time (Mau Mau rebellion). For example he appealed for justice and equality for British Indian subjects claiming “It is the Indians who have made and developed the deserts of East Africa... through trade for the last 300 years and it is they alone who have done the work of exploitation and development of the country’s resources.” (Aiyar, 2015, p. 22). He claimed that it was through the

Indians that the British were able to exert economic and political presence in the region. Eventually there was an alignment between the British colony and the Indians. The colonial government recruited many Indians as in low-level positions such as clerks. This alignment further created the rift between the Kenyan natives and the Indians, hence the hostile relationship between the two. The famous Jevanjee gardens are named after him.

Fitz De Souza also made several contributions to Kenyan politics. He was a legal defender for Mau Mau and Jomo Kenyatta during Kenyan struggle for independence. He became a Member of Parliament and Deputy Speaker of the Lower House, during the British rule of Kenya.

Additional Kenyan-Indians include Irashad Sumra, a member of parliament elected in 2013 and Shakeel Shabbir Mayor of Kisumu city.

## **Cultural Considerations**

Culturally, the Indian community and the African community have some similarities and differences. They are similar in the sense that both cultures have very strong family bonds including bonds for extended families. This is evident in how both culture take care of close and distant family members. For the Indian community, this test of families became evident when their relatives in Uganda were asked to leave. Both Indians and Africans have deep rooted cultures that they pass on from generation to generation. The Indian community though has maintained most of its culture whereas some of the African cultures have assimilated to more westernized cultures.

Another cultural practice we have in common is marriage and payment of dowry. The exchange of some form of gift such as, movable property, cash, livestock et cetera. In most cultures, what is gifted depends on the common valuable commodities within that group. For many African communities it has been livestock. There is a stark difference between how African and Indians pay dowry. While for the African community, the groom's family pays dowry to the bride, in the Indian community the bride pays dowry to the groom.

The Caste system of hierarchy that is in the Indian culture is not in the African culture. Though many African communities did have ruling families and automatic inheritance of positions of power, the rest of the community was not automatically born into specific categories. The caste system categorized their population

under four main groups. The top group was the priests, followed by the warriors, then the traders or merchants and finally the workers or servants.

The foods Kenyan Indians eat are also different from most African foods. However, this has since changes because many African communities now eat many of the Indian foods. Most Africans learned how to cook Indian foods from working for them as house helps. When looking at assimilation, the Indian community can be said to have assimilated to some degree. Many of the Kenyan Indians living in the different regions in Kenya, learn the language of the local community and try to get along with them. The Kenyan Indians still maintain their cultural practices and pass that on to their children despite

the various locations that they settle. Conversely, the Indian community has not really made provisions for Africans to assimilate to the Indian culture. Unlike the Europeans who encouraged, to some extent coerced, Africans to assimilate into the western culture the Indians reserved their practices for their own.

### **Reflection**

Positioning myself as an “outsider”, this review of the Indian culture has come from observation and interaction in spaces and places within the context of East Africa and Indians in the Diaspora. More importantly many of the perspectives shared, personal experiences schooling and living with Indians as my neighbors, are from childhood experiences. Growing up, I lived in South C, a neighborhood that in the seventies was populated by Kenyan Indians. My first nursery school, Parkview Day

Nursery, what would be equivalent to a preschool and kindergarten in United States, was owned by an Kenyan Indian family. Many of the children who attended this nursery school were from affluent families. It was typical for Indian communities to start their own schools. As has been mentioned before many schools were Asian owned and operated, Examples included Arya schools, Parklands schools, Aga Khan schools, Breaburn schools, MM Shah and MM Chandaria schools, and Oshwal (Visa) schools. Up until the early eighties, many expatriates from India and other countries occupied many of the professional jobs- teachers, doctors, lawyers et cetera. My math and science teachers were from India. Many expatriates from India taught most of the science

subjects in schools, colleges and universities. Their expertise was necessary for this young growing nation.

Equally important was their service in the health care sector. Many Asians owned and ran Hospitals. The largest one of which is Aga Khan Hospital, which can be found in the three major cities; Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu.

Since the 1990s, the Kenyan-Indians have been an important part of Kenya's development and have been instrumental in education, industry, health and politics. Despite evidence that the close connections were brought about by tragic events (1998 bombing of Kenyan Embassy, and 2013 attack at Westgate), the relationship between the African and Indians in Kenya has continued to improve. The Kenyan-Indian community no longer operates in the shadows, but is an integral part of growing



the Kenyan economy. They have demonstrated in more ways that Kenya is home and that they are important stakeholders in the decisions, implementation, and resolutions of Kenyan issues.

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